

The Mother House of the Grey Nuns: A Building History of the General Hospital

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On 4 December 1875, an article entitled “Our Public Institutions” was published in the *Canadian Illustrated News*. Accompanying Eugène Haberer’s engraving of Montreal’s General Hospital of the Grey Nuns¹ (Figure 1) was a description of the venerable institution’s new buildings:

In 1871, the old building on Foundling Street [now Place d’Youville] was abandoned for want of space, and the present magnificent edifices, shown in our sketch, were and are being constructed. From 1747 to the present day, the Hospital has cared for 1,490 poor and infirm men, 3,240 women, 1,914 orphans and 19,472 foundlings. The new buildings as seen in our sketch, cover an immense area, and with the church, will form the largest establishment of the kind in America.²

The General Hospital — more commonly known today as the Mother House of the Grey Nuns — appears monumental in Haberer’s engraving, owing to his use of a bird’s-eye perspective. Centred in its own block, approximately 61 metres from Dorchester Boulevard, the convent is presented with the air of a prestigious, important public building. The artist depicted a “French” garden in the foreground, complete with rigidly geometrical *parterres*, central fountains with orthogonal, axial pathways, manicured lawns, and carefully aligned rows of trees. The great length of the principal façade is balanced by a 241-foot-high (73.5 m) tower that rises from a Latin-cross plan neo-Romanesque church. Apses, expressed on the exterior, terminate the nave and the transept-ends. Centrally placed within the architectural composition, the church dominates the symmetrical “H”-plan five-storey convent. Perpendicular wings, with their gabled ends facing south to Dorchester Boulevard, define a plaza in front of the church on the south side. On the rooftops, bell turrets (*clochetons*) echoing the church’s steeple mark the intersections of the principal east-west block with the two north-south wings. Porticoes facing St-Mathieu and Guy streets terminate the east-west block. Two smaller blocks at the rear extremities of the side wings

turn inward and partially enclose a courtyard behind the church. Designed by prominent 19th-century Montreal architect Victor Bourgeau (1809-88), the Mother House was widely considered the highest achievement among contemporary convents. It belonged to a firmly established tradition: a survey of Montreal’s convents reveals a cohesive type.

The General Hospital, a charitable institution in the city, filled an important role as a succour for society’s poor and alienated. Its long history predates many other prominent institutions. In fact, many other institutions, such as asylums, prisons, workhouses, hospitals, and hostels, had their origins within its walls.³ In Montreal, the first General Hospital was established in 1694 by the Frères Charon at Pointe-à-Callière.⁴ Now called *Maison Mère d’Youville* (Figure 2), this late 17th-century structure became a prototype for many of Montreal’s convents, including the new 19th-century Mother House of the Grey Nuns. It also acted as Baillairgé’s model for the Grey Nuns’ convent (now called *Maison Mère Mallet*) in Québec City.⁵

This “Montreal style” of convent, characterized by outward-facing buildings, departed from earlier schemes in New France such as the Ursuline convent in Québec City, which borrowed from monastic models.⁶ The cloistral type — built around a series of courtyards, thereby closing the community in on itself — proved unsuitable for the apostolate activities carried out by the first generation of religious communities established in Montreal. These congregations instead adopted a palatial form for their buildings, an institutional model that the Sulpicians (seigneurs of Montreal) and the second bishop of Québec, Monseigneur de Saint-Vallier, brought with them from 17th- and 18th-century France. Indeed, Québec architectural historian Gérard Morisset likened 17th-century convents to both “petits châteaux” and “grands manoirs.”⁷ A chapel replaced the grand hall at the centre of a symmetrical threefold division of an “E”-shaped plan, transforming the palace-type into a convent-type. Nineteenth-century convent templates differed from these earlier models only in scale.⁸

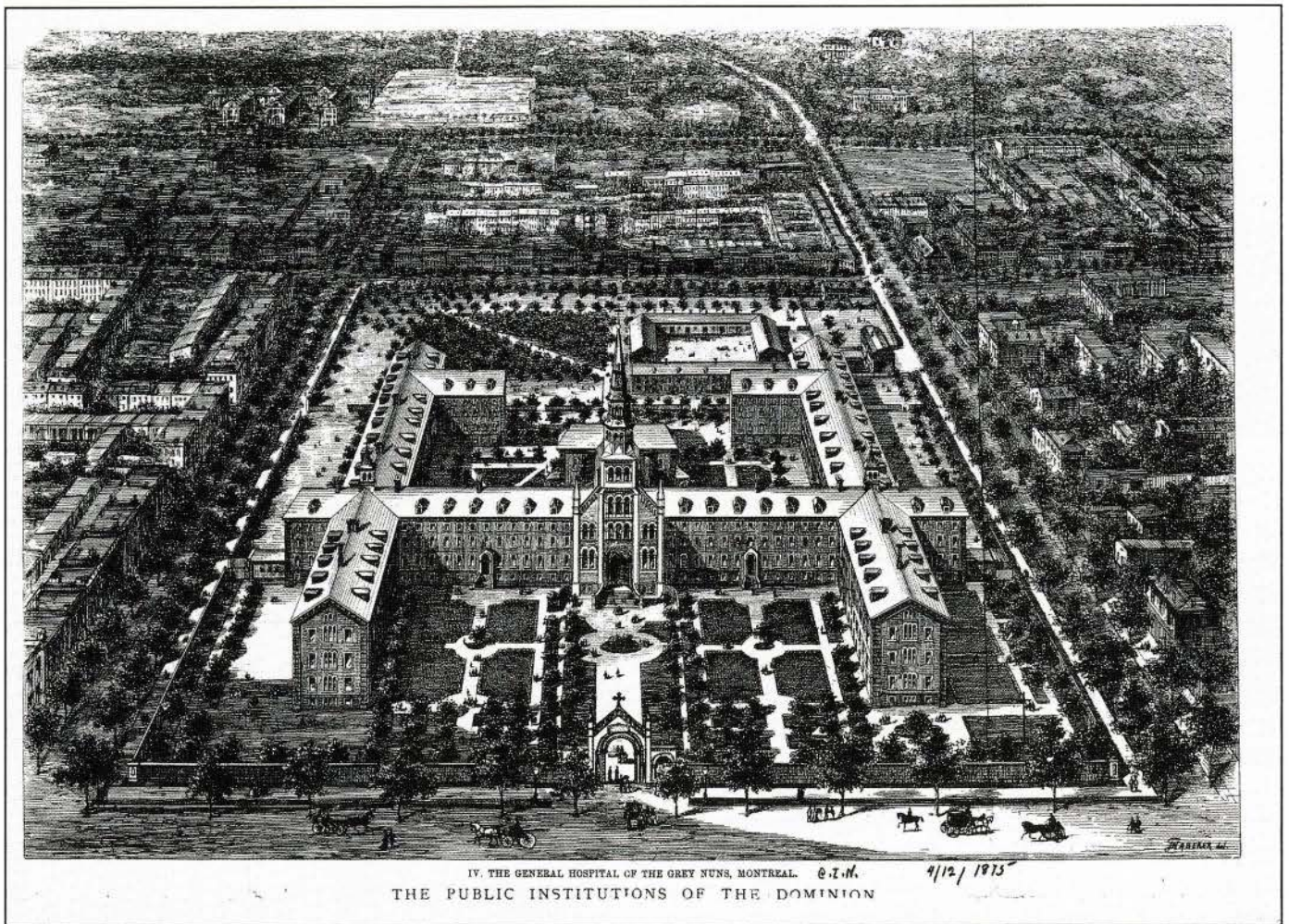


Figure 1. The Mother House of the Grey Nuns, Montreal; engraving by Eugène Haberer. (*Canadian Illustrated News* 12, no. 23 [4 December 1875]: 355; clipping #6287, D.S.8, Collection Photothèque, Bibliothèque Nationale du Québec, Montreal)

The old General Hospital was abandoned for more than the “want of space” cited in the *Canadian Illustrated News* article. Periodic spring flooding plagued the low-lying Pointe-à-Callière site, causing insalubrious conditions.⁹ The city’s tenacious expropriation pressures also pushed the religious community to relocate (the city subsequently drove St-Pierre Street through the chapel of the old hospital, and St-Normand Street through the laundry annex).¹⁰ Thus, at their meeting on 3 February 1861, the Grey Nuns’ administrative council delegated three of its members to acquire a new site on the outskirts of Montreal.¹¹

On 19 March 1861, the three administrators — Sœur Marie Julie Hainault *dits* Deschamps (Supérieure), Sœur Elizabeth Forbes *dite* McMullen (Assistante), and Sœur Mary Jane Slocombe (Maîtresse des Novices) — purchased from the Sulpician Order an irregular plot of land bounded by Guy, Ste-Catherine, St-Mathieu and Dorchester streets. Four days later, the administrators bought Mr. J. Mullins’ property to complete a trapezoidal lot measuring 750 feet by 550 feet by 800 feet by 650 feet (228.6 m by 167.6 m by 243.8 m by

198.1 m).¹² Known as Mont Sainte-Croix, this site formerly formed part of the Sulpicians’ Domain (Figure 3). Until the 1860s it had comprised mostly farmland.¹³ While portrayed as a broad boulevard in the *Canadian Illustrated News*, Dorchester’s antecedent, St-Jean Baptiste Road, once known as the “chemin du roi,” was little more than a dirt path.¹⁴ Farms, like those that appear in the background of the Haberer engraving toward the foot of the Mount Royal, quickly disappeared with the exodus of the bourgeoisie from the city core. This area of the city developed rapidly in the 1840s as an English middle-class residential neighbourhood; it was designated quartier St-Antoine in 1845.¹⁵ Development continued through to the turn of the 20th century. The prominent families — the wealthiest of whom settled primarily in the famous northwest sector of St-Antoine known as the “Golden Square Mile” — that looked down upon the working-class suburbs of St-Henri, Ste-Cunégonde, and Ste-Ann maintained a powerful geographical distinction between themselves and the poor.¹⁶

In moving to this area, the Grey Nuns not only established themselves in a posh neighbourhood, but also gained proximity



Figure 2. The Maison Mère d'Youville, Montreal. (T. Martin, 1994)

to their spiritual/religious fathers, the Sulpicians, who had relocated their seminary to this same area in 1857. Indeed, the area became a kind of religious enclave, since the two other religious communities served by the Sulpicians — the Hospitalières de St-Joseph and the Congrégation Notre-Dame — also installed themselves in roughly the same area, in 1859 and 1908 respectively.¹⁷ One might ask whether the so-called Sulpician communities were attempting to stake out their territory, so to speak, in light of Montreal Bishop Ignace Bourget's policy of expansionism.¹⁸ Although the location of the women's convents suggests that the nuns aligned themselves with the powerful, both secular and religious, a more practical consideration governed the Grey Nuns' decision regarding a new site, that being more space at a higher elevation. Their choice had the added advantage of proximity to the population they served, notably the working poor who lived below the hill in the southern section of the quarter, and in adjacent neighbourhoods — St-Henri and Ste-Cunégonde, for example — near the industrializing Lachine Canal and the railways.

The Grey Nuns did not, however, immediately erect their new headquarters. They experienced a significant delay in construction, partly because the priests had leased part of the land to a John Nicholson for a five-year term that began 1 November 1860, and partly because they lacked liquid capital.¹⁹ This is not too surprising, since the religious community was engaged in many other projects during this period, such as the founding of new missions both within the greater Montreal vicinity and outside the province.²⁰ To obtain the required financing to buy the Mont Sainte-Croix property, the nuns relied to a great extent on their prior real estate investments; for example, the community sold off part of its farm at Pointe-St-Charles to the Grand Trunk Railway in 1873-74.²¹

Though their building would not be realized for another ten years, it appears the Grey Nuns had already begun to visualize the form of their convent. An 1859 site plan shows

a pencilled diagram of a convent with overall dimensions indicated as follows: length of principal façade 470 feet, side wings 400 feet, width of wings 45 feet (143.3, 121.9, and 13.7 metres respectively).²² Not surprisingly, its "H"-plan recalled the Hôtel Dieu (then under construction), though in the sketch the chapel volume protruded from the front façade rather than toward the rear.

On 31 March 1869, the Grey Nuns' twelve administrators commissioned renowned architect Victor Bourgeau on the condition that "pourvu toutefois que le prix fixé par le dit Architecte ne fut pas trop élevé."²³ It was not his first building on their account; he had previously been responsible for the chapel for the Hospice St-Joseph in 1852 and the Refuge Sainte-Brigide in 1860. He would later undertake the chapel and the renovation of the manoir at Chateaugay, begun 1 November 1881.²⁴ In fact, Bourgeau became known as the architect of the Grey Nuns, though many other women's religious communities had also hired the prolific architect: for example, the Sœurs de la Miséricorde had engaged him for the

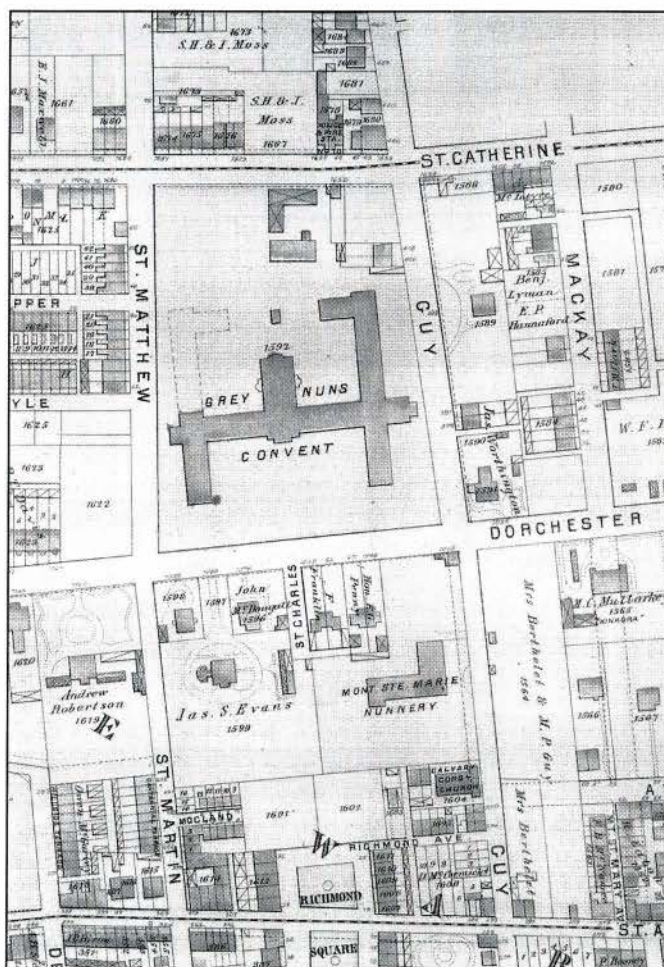


Figure 3. Map of Mont Sainte-Croix, Montreal, and the surrounding area. (H.W. Hopkins, *Atlas of the City and Island of Montreal: Including the Counties of Jacques Cartier and Hochelaga* [Montreal: Provincial Surveying and Pub. Co., 1879], plate L, p. 55 [detail]; Rare Books and Special Collections Division, McGill University Libraries, Montreal)

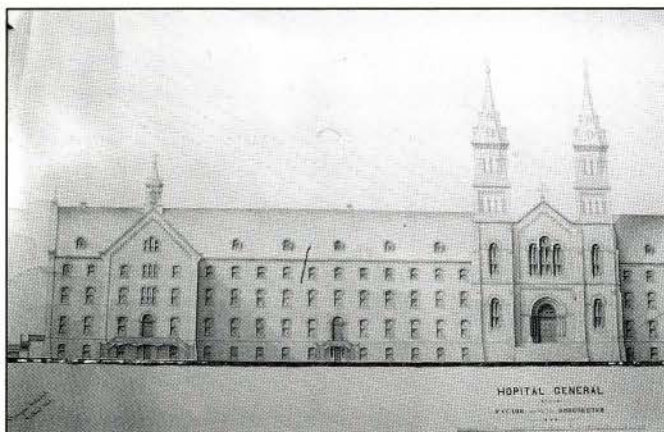


Figure 4. Façade for the Mother House of the Grey Nuns, Montreal; Victor Bourgeau, architect, 1868. (Archives des Sœurs Grises de Montréal, MM 1190 rue Guy, Doc. 5(d), "Hôpital Général, façade sur la rue Dorchester")

initial construction phases of their convent on St-Hubert (1853-84); the Congrégation Notre Dame had commissioned him for one wing of Villa Maria (c. 1855); the Hospitalières de St-Joseph had hired him for the Hôtel Dieu located on Mont Sainte-Famille at avenue des Pins between du Parc and St-Urbain (1859-61); and the Sœurs de Notre-Dame du Bon Pasteur d'Angers had him design the addition of a public chapel to their Sherbrooke Street convent (1878). In similar fashion, contractors David and Joseph Perrault were consistently hired by religious communities for their construction projects.²⁵

As a phenomenon, this indicates either that the Order's patronage "made" these firms appear solid, or that the nuns consistently relied on reputable firms, often those who had had previous experience (true, too, of many powerful institutions). Consequently, Bourgeau, together with religious

women's communities, became responsible in part for the establishment of a convent typology in 19th-century Montreal, if not all French-speaking Canada. The convent of the Sœurs de Sainte-Anne at Lachine (1871-73), for example, attributed to Théophile Paré, Maurice Perrault, and Albert Mesnard, borrowed the architectural language of the Grey Nuns' Mother House, the model *par excellence*.²⁶ During this period in Québec (and Canadian) history, religious communities experienced great expansion, a trend that was encouraged by Bishop Bourget in the Montreal region.

Haberer's engraving seems to represent the climax of an involved design process, since Bourgeau's original 1868 site plan of the Mother House of the Grey Nuns differs significantly.²⁷ His initial concept for the convent, tinted pink on a 114.3 cm x 152.4 cm drawing, incorporated two stair towers within the church structure. An exquisite ink and wash elevation also depicts the chapel front with two spires (Figure 4), recalling John Ostell's façade for Notre Dame Basilica (1841-43), in addition to other Bourgeau twin-steeple churches such as Saint-Louis-de-Gonzague (1857) or Église de Lavaltrie (1869). But this elaborate vision of the convent did not materialize.

In reworking his design (which closely corresponds to the actual building), Bourgeau streamlined the architectural features, especially those of the façade. He proposed a single steeple composed of multiple stages reminiscent of the church spires of Christopher Wren (popularized by pattern books like those of James Gibbs), as evidenced by a revised elevation signed by Bourgeau and Leprohon (Figure 5).²⁸ In addition, the architect simplified the ornate trilobate windows originally proposed for the chapel and gable ends. They had previously comprised a taller centre light bracketed by two smaller ones

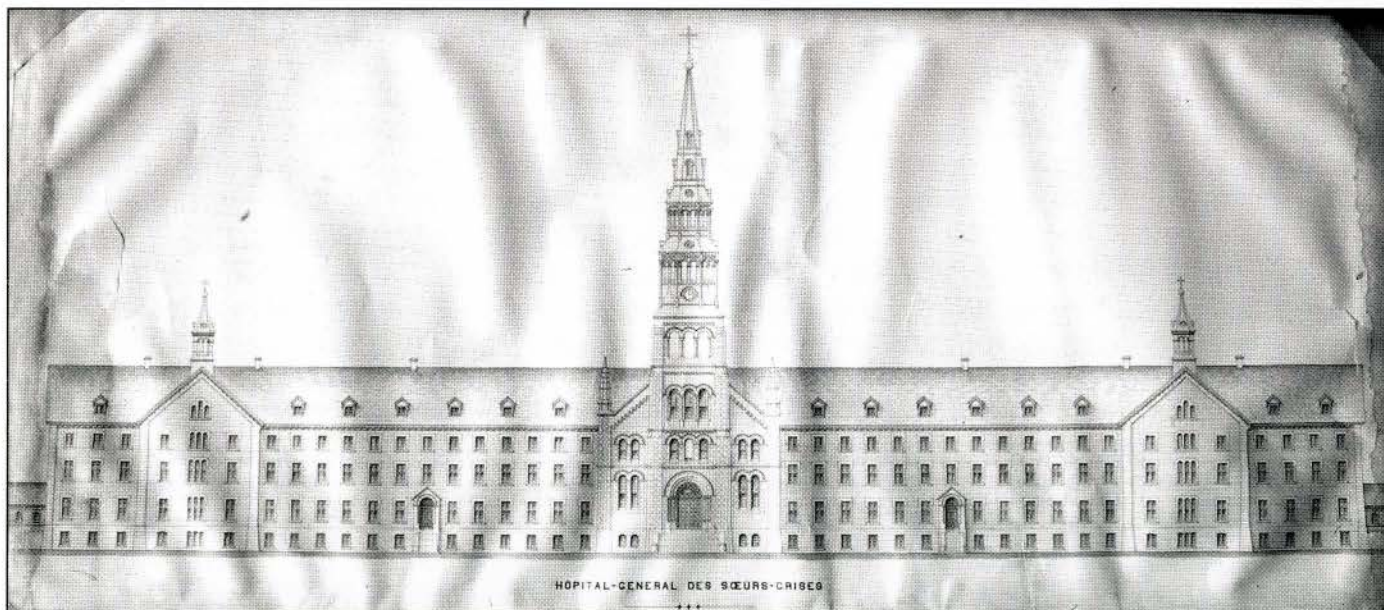


Figure 5. Revised façade of the Mother House of the Grey Nuns, Montreal; Victor Bourgeau, architect, 1869. (Archives des Sœurs Grises de Montréal, MM 1190 rue Guy, Doc. 1)

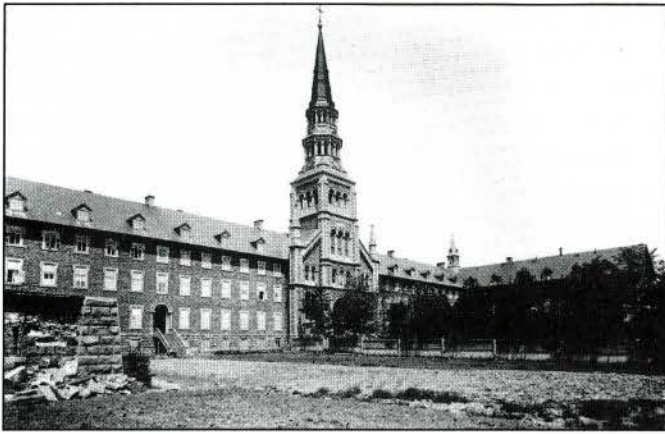


Figure 6. Mother House, c. 1898. (Archives des Sœurs Grises de Montréal, photos, "Maison Mère — Guy 1F, extérieure avant 1900")

in the Palladian style, according to his 1868 elevation. Instead, he changed them to rounded windows of a uniform height, more in keeping with a neo-Romanesque idiom. Bourgeau also modified the overall fenestration: the arched window openings on the initial drawings were replaced by the simpler rectangular frames that we see today. Perhaps these decisions were motivated by the religious community's financial constraints.²⁹ It appears, then, that the architect's original design was too ostentatious for the Grey Nuns. When later presented with two alternatives for the single church spire, however, the nuns chose the more elaborate design.

Another interpretation of the changes in the Mother House elevations derives from the manner in which the architect clarified the distinctions between, and the use of, two different styles in the composition of the façades, Palladian (or a reductive, rationalist French neoclassicism) and Romanesque Revival. In the original proposal, features of both styles were expressed in the two different parts of the building — the hospital and the church — thus mixing the two architectural vocabularies. Bourgeau had included, for example, arched windows (a Romanesque feature) in an elevation otherwise organized along French neoclassical lines for the main body of the hospital, and Palladian windows in the front of the neo-Romanesque church and gable ends. The stylistic differentiation proposed in the architect's revised design for the façade helped to visually separate the functions of the building — public:Palladian / religious:Romanesque.

As built, the convent's symmetrically composed elevations featured a vertical hierarchy, from the heavily rusticated grey stone base with deeply set windows to the smooth, linear uniformity of upper levels with aligned bays of repetitive, rectangular openings that decreased in size the higher the storey, and the pitched slate roof (Figure 6).³⁰ This hierarchical organization of the hospital façades recalled the French neo-classical or rationalist public institutional architecture of the French Ancien Régime, such as Maison Mère d'Youville and

the Old Seminary in Québec City designed by architect Charles Baillairgé (1826-1906), a contemporary of Bourgeau.³¹

In contrast, central tripartite arched windows (unique to the gable ends), with their inherent references to early Christian architecture, expressed a religious vocabulary in the Mother House elevations and recalled the similarly grouped windows in the neo-Romanesque church front. These special windows not only reminded the users and the passersby of the religious vocation of the building, but generally denoted communal spaces — such as the refectory, the community room, and dormitories — or the termination of hallways. The remaining repetitive, uniformly spaced fenestration reflected the approximately ten-foot-wide structural bays; otherwise, they revealed little of the building's internal subdivisions and functions.

The aesthetic differentiation between different parts of the convent, therefore, heightened the contrast between the relatively ornate church and the austere hospital, the latter serving as a background to the former. Unlike Victorian houses, where characteristic bay windows and decorative architectural elements in the façade distinguished and personalized one's individual identity to the outside world, the convent/hospital walls projected religious conformity and collective anonymity. This texturing was a precise echo of the social configurations within the organization of the community.³² Though perhaps unintentional, the net result of the architect's (and client's) design decisions architecturally subordinated the women's activities (the hospital relative to the church); it also symbolically rendered the nature of the women's vocation.

Not only did Bourgeau revise the elevations, he made important modifications to the plans. A mortuary chamber appended to the side of the chapel and water closets attached as pavilions to the rear interior faces of the indigents' wing (*aile des pauvres*), for example, were crossed out in pencil on the architect's inked ground floor plan. Though it is at present impossible to determine who actually made these pencil marks, the appendages to the convent were not built.³³ The architect also substituted the exterior stairs at both street entrances with enclosed porticoes. These types of alterations could have resulted from negotiations between three different parties, the architect, the client, and the contractor. Careful comparisons between the architect's original drawings, as-built plans, and the extant building reveal even more inconsistencies. For instance, the dimensions changed from the 48-foot (14.6 m) width originally proposed to the 50-foot (15.2 m) width actually built. The number of windows (on each floor level, back and front) in the walls on either side of the chapel were increased from eleven to thirteen. Windows were also added to other wings, two in the community wing (*aile de la communauté*) and six in the workshop wing (*aile des ateliers*). Consequently, the latter was lengthened from 210 feet to 240 feet (64 to 73.2 m). The laundry (*lavoir*), too, was increased

10 feet (3 m) in length.³⁴ Decisions of this kind must have been made by the religious community. Their choice of a larger, plainer building might have reflected a different set of priorities (presumably governed by pragmatism) than the architect's own. The Grey Nuns' habit, too, rejected the monastic trappings of veil, guimpe, and coiffe. Instead, their costume consisted of a heavy grey dress with a black bonnet. Its pragmatism, like that of their building, was imbued with Mère d'Youville's charismatic humility.³⁵

The rough-faced Montreal greystone (*pierre grise bouchardée*), a hard dark-grey limestone popular among local builders, used in the Grey Nuns' simple, well-proportioned convent perhaps metaphorically alludes to the name of this important Order.³⁶ The nickname followed the French custom of calling non-cloistered, non-endowed religious women such as the *Sœurs de la Charité de l'Hôpital Général de Montréal*, "grey nuns."³⁷ The stone's roughness contrasts with the ashlar reserved for window framing and corner detailing, which relieves the austerity of the fortress-like façade. The military associations of the external appearance, especially the thick load-bearing masonry walls, were probably not lost on the nuns. Maison Mère d'Youville, for instance, was once mistaken for a large fort by invading troops during the English-French-American-Indian wars of the 18th century.³⁸ Only the convent walls facing the public domain and the church (built in the round), however, were of dressed greystone; field stone was used for the rear interior walls, allowing for financial savings. Front elevations were considered the most important because they were in public view, so less expensive finishes were limited to less exposed elevations.

The architectural plans were apparently to be submitted and ratified by the bishop, since he exercised diocesan jurisdiction over the nuns at the time of construction. The Sulpicians, however, contested the bishop's authority over this customary stipulation in reserving for themselves the issuance of approvals for construction projects undertaken by the Congrégation Notre-Dame costing more than £300. Their power presumably extended as well over the Grey Nuns and the Hospitalières de St-Joseph.³⁹ Neither the bishop nor the Sulpicians subsidized the construction. Rather, the Grey Nuns themselves fully underwrote their own project for the Mother House. By limiting stylistic features to a few ornamental details, the religious community ensured that costs came in within their budget. The nuns certainly could not afford to build cathedrals; besides, their priorities lay with aiding the poor.

Nevertheless, as patrons of architecture, the nuns took the initiative in shaping their environment. A letter dated 1862, addressed by Monseigneur Bourget to a parish priest, further substantiates the fact that the nuns themselves dictated their needs (on site, no less!): "Il faudrait aussi que la Supérieure de la Providence se trouvât sur les lieux avec quelque-unes de

ses sœurs pour dire à l'architecte ce qui pourrait leur convenir pour mieux faire les œuvres."⁴⁰ Even the Grey Nuns noted some of their own Sœurs supervising construction sites.⁴¹ In fact, in 1868 Sœur Marie Julie Hainault *dits* Deschamps was "chargée, à titre d'assistante, de la construction de la Maison Mère, rue Guy," and during her term as Mother Superior she followed "de près l'achèvement de la chapelle qu'érige l'architecte Victor Bourgeau et les maçons Perrault sur le terrain boueux de la Maison Mère."⁴²

Construction of the complex began with the first delivery of stone on 16 December 1868, and stretched over a period of some thirty years, each phase or wing of the Mother House initiated as funds became available, or the need for more space became too great. In pursuing large projects such as this one, the Grey Nuns regularly invoked their patron saint for support. On 13 January 1869, for instance, the community made a pact with Saint Joseph for money for the new construction amounting to \$50,000 in exchange for 50,000 acts of virtue. The deed for the Mont Sainte-Croix site was also signed in the nuns' residence on the fête de St-Joseph. On 1 February 1873, in anticipation of the church construction, the nuns made another pact, promising to support (*nourrir*) three families in Saint Joseph's honour and to give food to any destitute person who knocked on their door in exchange for the necessary funds. Such promises acted as an incentive, mobilizing the community to work as a collective.⁴³ Different phases of construction, however, were associated with different Mothers Superior.⁴⁴

The first phase, under the supervision of Mère Slocombe, entailed the construction of the eastern wing along Guy Street. Comprised of several rectangular blocks, the plan resembled a reverse "F." A number of ancillary structures had preceded construction of the convent itself: located in the rear, toward the corner of Guy and Ste-Catherine streets, these included a cowshed, a stable, a *remise* (shed), and a *hangar* (shed without walls akin to a lean-to, which also sheltered a forge). A rubble-stone two-storey house for employees (*maison des engagés*) also housed a bakery. The religious community took possession of their new Hôpital Général on 7 October 1871, the day following its benediction.

The building of the church began 8 April 1874 (it was under construction at the time of the Haberer engraving's publication). One month later, the nuns initiated the indigents' wing to the west of the chapel. In 1879 they suspended work on this wing, though the ground and first floors were ready for occupation. Meanwhile, on 1 December 1878, the community celebrated its first mass in its newly consecrated *chapelle de l'Invention de la Sainte-Croix*.⁴⁵ Mère Elisabeth Dupuis oversaw this second building phase.

During the third phase, Mère Deschamps again supervised construction of the Mother House. In 1886 she had the indigents' kitchen wing built, and on 17 March 1887 she had

construction resume on the three remaining storeys of the indigents' wing. The nuns moved into this western portion of the building after its benediction on 31 May 1888. Ten years later, in 1898, work started on the final phase, supervised by Mère Praxède Filiatrault. By 1899, the first and ground floors of the orphanage were ready, and the entire wing bordering St-Mathieu was completed on 1 October 1901, an occasion marked by its benediction.⁴⁶

As the *Canadian Illustrated News* article indicated, the Mother House of the Grey Nuns was projected to be the largest of its day; it covered an area of some 7,800 square metres.⁴⁷ The dimensions of this monumental five-storey building were impressive: the floor-to-floor heights in the first and second storeys were a generous 14 and 15 feet (4.3 and 4.6 m); the convent's east-west façade parallel to Dorchester measured 573 feet (174.7 m), and the perpendicular wings along St-Mathieu and Guy streets measured 308 and 436 feet (93.9 and 132.9 m) respectively (including galleries).⁴⁸ Other major contemporary Montreal institutions, such as the Hôtel-Dieu and the Royal Victoria Hospital, had yet to reach this scale. The Hôtel-Dieu covered some 5,110 square metres, an area approximately two-thirds the size of the Mother House at the turn of the century.⁴⁹

The Mother House, then, as a physical intervention of monumental scale in the growing industrial city, represented a deliberate assertion of the nuns, a concrete manifestation of their individual and collective efforts. The enormous size of the building responded to a genuine need to accommodate as many alienated people as possible, as well as increasing numbers of women taking the veil. The nuns evidently realized their important role in the city; the massing of the convent clearly suggested a public, institutional building, static and secure. The Haberer engraving is particularly revealing because it not only reinforces this reading, but also stands in sharp contrast to the situation that really existed on the convent site. A solid stone wall, broken only by an entry arch that framed the allée to the chapel, ostensibly cloistered the community from the outside world. Yet, it was well known that the Grey Nuns actively conducted their business in and about Montreal, visiting needy people in their homes, for instance.⁵⁰ Though it may have represented symbolic enclosure, the actual wooden fence built in March 1872, soon after the first stage of construction, merely fulfilled conditions outlined in the purchase contract. The deed set out standard guidelines that restricted buildings to private residential use. It further mandated that properties be enclosed with a fence and planted with trees along Guy and Dorchester streets.⁵¹ Photos taken at the turn of the century portray the gardens of other prominent estates as enclosed with fences and heavily treed.

Although well-maintained and deliberately planned, the convent grounds were not constructed as an ornamental park, as suggested by the 1875 engraving. Instead, the nuns converted their property into a productive agricultural landscape.

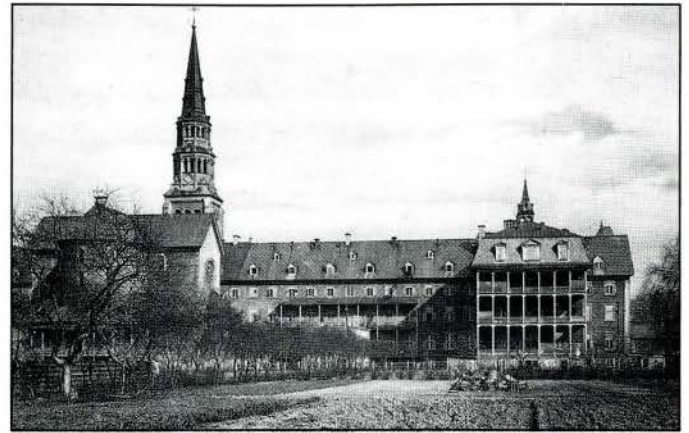


Figure 7. Productive gardens behind the Mother House. (Archives des Sœurs Grises de Montréal (photo album), *Hôpital Général des Sœurs Grises*, 390 Rue Guy, Montréal [Montreal: Librairie Beauchemin Limitée, 1910])

Photographs taken about 1910 reveal the rear of the Mont Sainte-Croix site as a farmstead (Figure 7). Fences divided the cultivated fields into different sections, and wooden poles supported young trees in extensive orchards. Another photograph of about 1930 shows several nuns working in vegetable gardens.⁵² This land probably did not provide for the community throughout the year, though it did yield fresh produce during the summer months.

Although they devised many fundraising strategies for the financing of building projects, such as lotteries and bazaars, the Grey Nuns depended as well on the generosity and good will of their donors.⁵³ As a Catholic institution they catered primarily to French-speaking Canadians and English-speaking Irish-Canadians, although like other large institutions in Montreal, both religious and secular, the Grey Nuns generally cared for anyone in need, regardless of nationality or creed.⁵⁴ A significant number of women within religious communities were English speaking: at least two formed part of the Grey Nuns' administrative ranks during the period under study, Sœurs Mary Jane Slocombe and Elizabeth Forbes-McMullen.⁵⁵ The election of a bilingual administrative council indicates political shrewdness on the part of the community. Did the building, as an Anglo-French stylistic hybrid, consciously appeal to nationalistic sensibilities? The nuns garnered support from both the wealthy Anglophone community and Franco-phone Montrealers.⁵⁶

Familial relations also played an important role in the religious community's support network. Of "Madame Anne-Marie Tiffin, sœur de Marguerite Devins, Sœur Grise, devenue veuve le 21 octobre 1881, ... les sœurs annalistes inscristrent inlassablement les prodigalités de cette humble dame, voulant à tout prix conserver l'anonymat." This widow made innumerable gifts to the Grey Nuns during her lifetime, as did her brother, Monsieur Richard Devins. His generous benevolence made possible the construction of the church tower, the tallest

in Montreal when constructed in 1890.⁵⁷ Brother and sister both lived at the Mother House as pensioners, and both insisted on anonymity with their donations. People who contributed moneys or goods in-kind implicated themselves in a larger societal process, as the religious women's collective efforts, teamed with private donations, ensured the maintenance of the city's less fortunate inhabitants. Not surprisingly, the nuns kept a running list of donors in acknowledgment.⁵⁸

The Hôpital Général became a site of pilgrimage for benefactors and turn-of-the-century tourists alike. Postcards and "Stereoscopic and lantern slides of places of interest" advertised by Parks' Photo Studio in Montreal evinced the Mother House's status as a historic landmark.⁵⁹ Descriptions of the "Grey Nunnery" published in traveller's and hotel guides promoted its inclusion as a contemporary tourist site of the city.⁶⁰ Dignitaries, such as the Governor General, the Marquis of Lorne, and Princess Louise, the Duchess of Argyll, toured the Mother House on several occasions. Possibly capitalizing on the publicity that such official visits generated, the nuns published 5,000 copies of *Reminiscence of my Visit to the Grey Nunnery*. Written in English the same year as Princess Louise's second tour of 16 October 1883, the sale of these booklets formed part of Monsieur Richard Devins' fundraising campaign for the *autel Père Éternel*, one of the church altars.⁶¹

Living inside an architectural monument may seem paradoxical for a religious community committed to anonymity and charitable work in society. The architecture and surrounding formal landscape of the convent as depicted in Haberer's rendering perhaps conveyed in architectural terms certain expectations of late 19th-century Montreal society: what a public institution should look like, the status of the religious as members of a social elite, and the subordinate role of nuns relative to the Church (even though they performed crucial social services). The artist's exaggerated allusions to a palatial archetype may have given an erroneous impression to 19th-century Canadians. As the following passage indicates, people sometimes misread the Grey Nuns' mission:

Il serait plus facile de trouver des étrangers, des américains surtout qui connaissent notre maison que de nos concitoyens. Tous savent que cet immense bloc de bâtisse appartient aux Sœurs Grises; ils conjecturent qu'elles doivent être très riches pour le soutenir. Qui si trouve renfermé? Des sœurs sans doute? La maison y contient un grand nombre! Quelle vie douce et facile elles doivent mener ... Que font-elles!⁶²

The Order had, incidentally, encountered resistance when they first proposed to locate their Hôpital Général in the St-Antoine quarter. The Anglophone residents had cited risk of contagion as an excuse, even though they had just recently completed construction of the Montreal General Hospital at the corner of Dorchester and St-Laurent streets, another

bourgeois area of the city.⁶³ Although the source of their resistance seemed unclear, it perhaps hinged on issues of aesthetics and economics: the ascetic convent might infringe on the development potential of the neighbourhood. The elitist image that the engraving projected perhaps reassured this class of Montrealers. The building itself became a source of great pride: "Plusieurs personnes qui connaissent l'architecture nous ont dit que cette façade est un des plus beaux monuments de la cité," the religious women proudly noted in their annals.⁶⁴ In fact, the Mother House of the Grey Nuns became renowned in America and Britain through travel guides, souvenir albums, and engravings, which effectively publicized the nuns' good works of charity.

Architectural historians have generally privileged the chapel in their formal treatments of the General Hospital, suggesting Ste. Madeleine de Vézelay as a model for the vault of the church or St. Brides, London, as a source for the steeple, for example.⁶⁵ While this kind of portrayal of the convent as an important architectural monument helps explain architect Victor Bourgeois's career and his mastery of styles, it typically places greater emphasis and hence a higher patrimonial value on the chapel, and thereby devalues the other parts of this historic building.⁶⁶ This bifurcation reproduces a male:visible / female:invisible dichotomy. Recall that the real achievement celebrated by the 1875 publication of Haberer's engraving was the construction of the church, since a major portion of the Mother House had already been built. But the Mother House is more than a monument to a particular architect; it is an artifact that embodies a complex story of human relationships, the relationships of this particular group of women to the Roman Catholic Church and society, for example. And, as with most stories, it contains multiple and sometimes contradictory interpretations.

Endnotes

- 1 The author would like to acknowledge Prof. Annmarie Adams, who supervised my M.Arch. thesis, "Housing the Grey Nuns: Power, Religion and Women in fin-de-siècle Montreal" (School of Architecture, McGill University, 1995), from which this article is derived; Sr. Gaétane Chevrier s.g.m., archivist at the Grey Nuns' archive; and the support of a Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation Graduate Scholarship, a McGill Humanities Research Grant, and a Graduate Student Award from the McGill Centre for Research and Teaching on Women. The article also benefited from the comments of three anonymous reviewers.
- 2 "Our Public Institutions," *Canadian Illustrated News* 12, no. 23 (4 December 1875): 355-56. Five days later, the engraving appeared in CIN's French counterpart, *L'Opinion Publique* 6 (9 December 1875): 580, 582.
- 3 The ties between convents, Hôpitaux généraux, and modern hospitals are apparent in the archaic definition of the word hospital: "charitable home, hospice, or school." In French, the ancient definition is an "établissement charitable, hospitalier, où l'on recevait les gens sans ressources, pour les entretenir, les soigner." *Collins English Dictionary*, s.v. hospital; *Le Petit Robert*, s.v. hôpital.
- 4 For a more complete architectural description of Maison Mère d'Youville, see Robert Lahaise, *Les édifices conventuels du Vieux Montréal: aspects ethno-historiques*, Collection Ethnologie, Cahiers du Québec (Québec: Hurtubise HMH, 1980), 387-422.
- 5 Raymonde Gauthier, "Victor Bourgeau et l'architecture religieuse et conventuelle dans le Diocèse de Montréal, 1821-1892," Thèse de doctorat, Université Laval, 1983, 225. Robert Caron, *Un couvent du XIX^e siècle: la maison des Sœurs de la Charité de Québec* (Montreal: Libre Expression, 1980), 29, 31, suggests that Baillaigé, in effect, introduced the Montreal style to Québec City. In contrast to Gauthier, he also suggests (pp. 36-7) that Gédéon de Catalogne's 1695 "H"-plan for the Hôtel-Dieu informed early Montreal convent typology, rather than that of the Hôpital Général.
- 6 Communauté Urbaine de Montréal [hereafter CUM], Service de la Planification du Territoire, *Architecture Religieuses II: les Couvents Montréal*, Répertoire d'architecture traditionnelle sur le territoire de la Communauté Urbaine de Montréal (Montreal: Communauté Urbaine de Montréal, 1984), xviii-xxi, also used the term "famille Montréal" to distinguish it from the Québec style.
- 7 CUM, *Architecture Religieuses II*, xiv.
- 8 Gauthier, "Victor Bourgeau," 219-25, 242. Alan Gowans, *Styles and Types of North American Architecture: Social Function and Cultural Expression* (New York: Icon Editions, 1992), includes *Québécois manoirs* in the appendix, under the category "palace," a form used for government and other powerful institutional forms (including schools). He treats the convent or monastery as a sanctuary or shrine.
- 9 "Déjà en 1843, les Sœurs Grises songeaient à quitter la Pointe-à-Callières à cause de fréquentes inondations. Mère McMullen avait entamé des démarches à cette fin; certaines oppositions s'étant manifestées, on a dû surseoir au projet." Estelle Mitchell s.g.m., *L'essor apostolique: Sœurs de la Charité de Montréal, "Sœurs Grises," 1877-1910* (Montreal: n.p., 1981), 14.
- 10 Lahaise, 517, 519.
- 11 Archives des Sœurs Grises de Montréal (hereafter ASGM), MM hist. 472, "Vente par Messrs les Ecclésiastiques du Séminaire de St. Sulpice de Montréal à la Communauté des Sœurs de Charité de l'Hôpital Général de Montréal, dites Sœurs Grises," 19 mars 1861.
- 12 ASGM, MM hist. 472.
- 13 An 1801 map depicts the site that became their property as part of the surrounding farmland; an 1815 map shows Guy Street. See Barbara Salomon de Friedberg, *Le Domaine des Sœurs Grises, Boulevard Dorchester* (Montreal: Ministère des Affaires Culturelles, Direction générale du Patrimoine, Service de l'Inventaire des Biens Culturels, Division Reconnaissance et Classement, 1975), 22-23.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 19.
- 15 Jean-Claude Robert, *Atlas historique de Montréal* (Montreal: Éditions Art Global et Éditions Libre Expression, 1994), 90.
- 16 Properties around the Mother House delineated in H.W. Hopkins, *Atlas of the City and Island of Montreal: Including the Counties of Jacques Cartier and Hochelaga* (Montreal: Provincial Surveying and Pub. Co., 1879), plate L, p. 55, bear Anglophone names, including Worthington, Mullark, McDougall, Evans, and Robertson. Brian Young, *In Its Corporate Capacity: The Seminary of Montreal as a Business Institution, 1816-1876* (Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1986), 143, notes that "in 1860 four large Guy Street lots were sold, all to merchants."
- 17 The Sulpicians built their Seminary in 1854-57 and the adjacent Collège Montréal in 1868-71. In 1906, the Congrégation Notre-Dame began construction of a new Mother House on Sherbrooke Street. Next door they built the École Normale Jacques-Cartier in 1913. The Petites Filles de St-Joseph established themselves in 1910 on the corner of Sherbrooke and Atwater streets. See CUM, *Architecture Religieuses II*, for comparative data on these convents. The Mont Ste-Marie nunnery — actually a boarding school operated by the Congrégation Notre-Dame — also figured in the neighbourhood, to the south of the Grey Nuns' Mother House.
- 18 Although all three women's religious orders were under the bishop's jurisdiction, they also retained close links to the Sulpician priests, who essentially served as confessors and advisors. See Marguerite Jean, *Évolution des communautés religieuses de femmes du Québec de 1639 à nos jours* (Montreal: Fides, 1977), 64; Gauthier, "Victor Bourgeau," 64-66.
- 19 ASGM, MM hist. 472, Doc. 3, 21 February 1861, "Une Partie du Domaine de la Montagne ou Ferme des Prêtres, Quartier St-Antoine" — a site plan on toile, 100 feet to 1 inch scale, signed by H. M. Perrault, arpenteur provincial — shows the farmhouse and barn on the property. Guy Pinard, *Montréal: son histoire, son architecture* (Ottawa: Les Éditions La Presse, 1989), 285, notes that the nuns were in a precarious financial position in 1868.
- 20 The ensemble of these convents and charitable institutions constitutes, in part, the object of the author's dissertation research.
- 21 ASGM, *Annales* 1877-80, p. 248; on 31 October 1874 they also sold a property on Côte-St-Antoine (p. 252), and in 1890 the community profited from the sale of the last portion of the Terrain des Tanneries. Ownership of this land dated from the era of les Frères Charon. ASGM, *Annales* 1888-90, p. 472. Pinard, p. 285, claims the nuns financed construction of the Mother House using profits from the sale of Îles de la Paix and the Vieux Moulin de Châteauguay, built under Mère d'Youville.
- 22 ASGM, MM hist. 472, Doc. 2, "Ferme des Prêtres: Plan of Building lots for sale forming part of the property known as the priest's farm belonging to Seminary of Montreal," 2 November 1859, signed by H.M. Perrault.
- 23 ASGM, "Registre des affaires temporelles, Deuxième volume du 24 novembre 1853 au 23 octobre 1899, Hôpital général des Sœurs de la Charité 'Sœurs Grises' Montréal," 37.
- 24 The Grey Nuns recorded that Bourgeau died in their Mother House; see ASGM, *Annales* 1888-92, p. 65. But for a few scattered obituaries, such as Emile Venne's "Victor Bourgeau, architecte (1809-1888)," *L'Ordre*, 22 March 1935, and minor entries in biographical dictionaries, precious little has been written on Bourgeau, Gauthier's dissertation excepted. See Gauthier's other published works: "Une pratique architecturale au XIX^e siècle: Victor Bourgeau, 1809-1888," *ARQ: Architecture Québec* 41 (February 1988); and *Construire une église au Québec: l'architecture religieuse avant 1939* (Montreal: Éditions Libre Expression, 1994). Partial lists of the architect's commissions can be found in Gauthier's "Victor Bourgeau," 337; "Une pratique," 16; and CUM, *Architecture Religieuses II*.
- 25 Contractors David and Joseph Perrault had worked with Bourgeau on the Hôtel Dieu, for example. See CUM, *Architecture Religieuses II*, 188-95.
- 26 *Ibid.*, xx-xxi.
- 27 ASGM, MM 1190 rue Guy, Doc. 4, "Plan Général de l'Hôpital Général des Sœurs Grises, Victor Bourgeau architecte 1868."
- 28 The drawing is of a later date because it includes Étienne-Alcibade Leprohon's signature; only Bourgeau signed the earlier 1868 site plan. Leprohon twice worked in partnership with Bourgeau, from 23 January 1869 to 29 May 1877 and 8 August 1880 to 1 March 1888 (at the end of Bourgeau's career and life). See also Gauthier, "Victor Bourgeau," 186; "Une pratique," 15; and *Construire*, 164-65, 166-67.

- 29 Bourgeau himself contributed money to realize certain details. His donation of 1,000 *piastres* was slated to help defray the cost of the church windows. See ASGM, *Annales* 1887-80, p. 259.
- 30 According to Sœur Blanche Morneau s.g.m., the slate roof was replaced with asphalt shingles in the 1950s, and then with copper sheet metal (tôle) in 1978.
- 31 Leslie Maitland, *Neoclassical Architecture in Canada*, Studies in Archeology, Architecture and History (Ottawa: National Historic Parks and Sites Branch, Parks Canada, 1984), 51-52, cites the Old Seminary, constructed in 1854-57 (which now houses the Université Laval school of architecture) as rare example in Canada of French neoclassicism (or Rationalism). This building, she states, shows Baillairgé's understanding of the work of the French rationalist architects Étienne-Louis Boullée (1728-99) and Claude-Nicolas Ledoux (1736-1806), as "the single unit of the window has been multiplied almost endlessly resulting in a building that is monolithic and primitive in elementalism, but in a highly sophisticated manner."
- 32 For a spatial analysis of the interior of the convent, see Tania Martin, "Housing the Grey Nuns: Power, Women and Religion in fin-de-siècle Montréal," in Annmarie Adams and Sally McMurphy, eds., *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture VII* (Knoxville, Tenn.: University of Tennessee Press, 1997), 212-29.
- 33 In 1910, however, a *funoir* was added as an attached pavilion to the rear interior face of the indigents' wing.
- 34 ASGM, MM 1190 rue Guy, Doc. 5(a); Doc. 4.; Doc. 5(d); 76 (a-e); ASGM, "Détails Historiques concernant les plans de la maison mère primitive et de l'actuelle," cahier A, and "Relève des plans 1^{ère} maison mère (1765-1871) maison mère actuelle (1871-1909)," cahier B.
- 35 See Albertine Ferland-Angers, *Mère d'Youville: première fondatrice canadienne*, 2nd ed. (Montreal: Centre Marguerite-d'Youville, 1977), 138, for a description of habits and other examples of the nuns' modesty.
- 36 Such greystone buildings were inventoried by Phyllis Lambert and Robert Lemire, *Inventaire des bâtiments du Vieux Montréal, de Quartier St-Antoine et de la ville de Maisonneuve construits entre 1880-1915* (Québec: Direction général du patrimoine, Inventaire des biens culturels, 1977).
- 37 Gauthier, "Victor Bourgeau," 69. A popular explanation goes like this: 18th-century residents of Montréal accused the first Grey Nuns of perpetuating foundress Marie-Marguerite Du Frost de Lajemmerais d'Youville's deceased husband's trafficking of alcohol, and even of drunkenness. They therefore nicknamed the fledgling association (founded in 1737) "Sœurs Grises." The word "grise" in French refers both to the colour grey — incidentally, the colour of their costume — and to drunkenness. Sœurs Réjeanne Grand/Maison s.g.m. and Marguerite Daoust s.g.m., guides at the Mère d'Youville museum and the Maison Mère d'Youville, refer to this anecdote, adding that Mère d'Youville accepted this derogatory label and the scorn associated with it as a mark of humility. See also Ferland-Angers, 74.
- 38 Fauteux, 218-9; Ferland-Angers, 146.
- 39 Jean, 64; Gauthier, "Victor Bourgeau," 64-66.
- 40 Gauthier, "Victor Bourgeau," 92-93.
- 41 Early examples of Grey Nuns as construction supervisors can be found in Fauteux, 200, 210, 310, 322.
- 42 Mère Deschamps also held other important administrative positions, such as Supérieure Locale and Économe. See Mitchell, *L'essor*, 20, 23.
- 43 It was signed by the Mother Superior, the General Assistant, the Assistant, and the Depositor on behalf of the community, and approved by the confessor of the community, M.C. Bonnissant Superior. ASGM, *Annales* 1877-80, p. 247; ASGM, "Détails Historiques, 3^e volume: maison mère rue Guy constructions etc. 1861-1909," iv.
- 44 Dates and dimensions are compiled from ASGM archival documents unless otherwise noted. CUM, *Architecture Religieuses II*, 94-101, also documents the construction phases.
- 45 The chapel and the site, Mont Sainte-Croix, are named in remembrance of the legendary murders of 1752, commemorated by the red cross at the corner of Guy and René-Lévesque. See Salomon de Friedberg, 19.
- 46 The crèche, however, was completed only in 1902. ASGM, *Annales* 1902-03, pp. 103-4.
- 47 Pinard, 284. CUM, *Architecture Religieuses II*, however, gives the historic building area as 13,512 square metres.
- 48 ASGM, "Détails Historiques concernant les plans de la maison mère primitive et de l'actuelle," cahier A, and "Relève des plans 1^{ère} maison mère (1765-1871) maison mère actuelle (1871-1909)," cahier B, both by Sœur St-Jean de la Croix. The laundry block was extended in 1888 and 1902. Pinard's dimensions on p. 287 — 572 feet (174.3 m) on Dorchester, 312 feet (95.1 m) on Guy, 452 feet (137.8 m) on St-Mathieu, and 180 feet (54.9 m) — differ slightly.
- 49 Calculations for the area of the Hôtel Dieu in about 1900 are extrapolated from a dimensioned plan of 1863 on display at the Musée des Hospitalières de St-Joseph in Montreal.
- 50 Charles Dickens in his travels to Montreal noted that "There were ... Sisters of Charity in the village streets." *Notes on America* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1842), 77.
- 51 ASGM, MM hist. 472. In 1880 a stone wall and iron grill replaced the wooden fence in avenue de l'Église. ASGM, "Détails Historiques concernant les plans de la maison mère primitive et de l'actuelle," cahier A, Sœur St-Jean de la Croix.
- 52 ASGM, *Album Souvenir*, 1930; photos "maison-mère — Guy extérieur avant 1900"; and additional photos of the convent conserved in the Notman Collection at the McCord Museum of Canadian History, Montreal.
- 53 The "Grand Lottery, To aid in the completion of the Hospital for the Aged and Infirm Poor, of The Grey Nuns of Montréal, under his Patronage of His Lordship, the R.C. Bishop of Montréal," for example, took place on 16 January 1879. ASGM, *Annales* 1877-1880, pp. 254, 287-90. The "regular agents," many of whom listed prestigious Notre-Dame Street addresses, sold the tickets advertised in flyers at \$0.50 each, or 5 for \$2.00.
- 54 Large wooden commemorative plaques recording patients according to their ethnic origin, on display at the Musée des Hospitalières de St-Joseph, attest to this, as do the Grey Nuns' *Annales*.
- 55 Mitchell, *L'essor*, 13, states that Mère Mary Jane Slocombe was born in England in 1819 and converted to Catholicism during the Oxford Movement before emigrating to Canada in 1836. She joined the Grey Nuns four years later. See also Estelle Mitchell s.g.m., *Mère Jane Slocombe, 1819-72* (Montreal: Fides, 1964). For other English speaking members, see the yearly *statistiques* kept in the *Annales*, ASGM.
- 56 Paul-André Linteau, *Histoire de Montréal depuis la Confédération* (Montreal: Boréal, 1992), chap. 9, suggests that Anglo-Montrealers gave to their own charitable institutions the lion's share of donations. Nevertheless, the Grey Nuns listed prominent figures such as James McGill as generous benefactors. See ASGM, *Annales* 1877-80, p. 255.
- 57 ASGM, "Détails Historiques concernant les plans de la maison mère primitive et de l'actuelle," cahier A; Mitchell, *L'essor*, 44, 48, 113.
- 58 ASGM, *Annales* 1881-83, p. 587; 1919-20, p. 216.
- 59 Some Parks' Studio stereoscopic photos are conserved in ASGM.
- 60 See, for example, *The Windsor Hotel Guide to the City of Montreal: With a Shopping Index and Directory* (Montreal: n.p., [1898]).
- 61 ASGM, *Annales* 1877-80, p. 353; 1881-83, pp. 571, 652. Notice that *Reminiscence* targeted specifically Anglophones readers, which suggests a distinct relationship between the two communities. A copy of this booklet can be found in the McLennan Library, McGill University.
- 62 ASGM, *Annales* 1906-08, pp. 239-41.
- 63 Pinard, 284-85.
- 64 ASGM, *Annales* 1877-80, p. 269.
- 65 CUM, *Architecture Religieuses II*, xx.
- 66 Before the chapel was declared a historic monument in 1974, and the property a historic site in 1976, a private developer had proposed demolishing all but the chapel. Pinard, 294-95.